

A Sermon
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Grace Baptist Church
Bryans Road, Maryland
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Where Two or Three Are Gathered

Matthew 18:15-20

"Where two or three are gathered...." That sounds like the latest update from the CDC. First, gatherings of more than 250 were discouraged or prohibited. Then it dropped to 50. Then the President recommended 10. At this rate, it feels like we'll soon be down to a new guideline of two or three. "Where two or three are gathered...."

But as many of you recognize, these are not the words of a state official or federal agency. These are the words of the one who at the end of Matthew's Gospel tells us that "all authority in heaven and on earth" have been given to him (28:18). These are the words of our Lord Jesus Christ, the one who governs the whole planet, the entire cosmos. "Where two or three come together in my name, there am I with them" (v. 20).

Jesus promises his presence. When his followers come together, he will be there. Not as a passive spectator, just filling a spot in the pew without really being engaged in what's happening, but rather as the sovereign participant in the life of the church, the community of his people.

Sometimes this community gets disrupted by division. Remember that today's text begins with Jesus saying, "If your brother [or sister] sins against you,..." No real surprises here. From the earliest days of the Christian community, church members have been at odds with one another, saying things and doing things that damage relationships and wound the fellowship of disciples. Thankfully, Jesus doesn't promise his presence only to congregations that are completely free of conflict. He doesn't say that he'll only show up at churches where there are no cracks in the spiritual kinship. No, he reminds his followers, then and now, that he is in their midst, doing the will of God, which includes bringing about reconciliation.

Our text lays out what many regard as a blueprint for conflict resolution in the church. First, go to the errant or disruptive member of the congregation, one-on-one, and try to restore the relationship. If that doesn't work, take along one or two others who can serve as witnesses to the communication between the offender and the offended. If that doesn't resolve the situation, bring the recalcitrant church member before the whole congregation to hear its plea. And eventually, if necessary, remove the person from the community of disciples.

We need to be careful about treating this text as a fool-proof formula for dealing with controversy in the church. For one thing, there are many other passages of Scripture that also address the subject of conflict resolution in a congregation, and can shed light on how we go about it. Plus the specifics of each situation may require us to adapt or adjust the pattern laid out here in Matthew. But even with these cautions in mind, we can still see just how important reconciliation is within the community of believers. So important that brothers and sisters in Christ should be going the extra mile, and exhausting every option, to cultivate cohesion in Christ's family.

When it comes to being faithful followers of Jesus, community matters. Jesus doesn't intend for discipleship to be an individual project. True, cultivating your personal relationship with our Lord is critical, but being in relationship with Jesus automatically brings you into relationship with others who have decided to follow him. The life of discipleship is life together.

Today's text is situated in the middle of a whole chapter that's held together by Matthew's stress on how to be a Christian community. At the beginning of the chapter, Jesus uses children to teach his followers about abandoning the pursuit of status and entering the gift of God's family. Then he tells a story about seeking and reclaiming the one sheep that has gone astray. Next comes today's text about restoring a disruptive member of the congregation. After that, the chapter closes with Jesus' story about a king and his servant, showing that disciples should forgive as they have been forgiven by God.

Christian community, life together, matters. It matters because God is present in Jesus, seeking and saving the lost. And the ongoing ministry of Jesus is embodied in his disciples, the church. So our coming together, our being together, is a living demonstration of God's work of bringing humankind together with himself through Christ, and being in our midst.

Today, we're not together like we usually are. We can see one another's faces, but only in our minds and imaginations. We can't shake one another's hands and offer one another hugs. We can't look one another in the eye and listen to one another's voice. We can't share the pew with one another in our church sanctuary. But we can gather electronically. We can practice digital discipleship. In the midst of the coronavirus pandemic, I'm thankful that we still have this means of coming together in Jesus' name.

Remember that Jesus' promise holds. Whether we gather in our sanctuary space or in cyberspace, he is with us. He is God with us. That's how Matthew began his Gospel, with the assurance that a child would be born, a child to be called "Immanuel"—God with us (1:23). And after taking us through the story of Jesus' life, death, and resurrection, Matthew brings us to the mountain, where our risen Lord commissions us and promises, "Surely I am with you always, to the very end of the age" (28:20).

Following Hurricane Katrina in 2005, one newspaper reporter wrote a story about several churches that had been scattered by the storm. One of those churches was White Dove Fellowship International Outreach Center, pastored by Reverend Michael Mille. The church normally had over 3,000 in attendance. But on the first Sunday after the hurricane, Reverend Mille preached to 300.

During his emotional sermon, Reverend Mille offered a unique Christian perspective on the tragedy and how it affected his congregation. He said, "We have successfully planted people all over the U.S." Then he also noted, "We used to sing Jesus is all we need...now he's all we've got."¹

We certainly aren't scattered in the same way or to the same degree as that congregation. In fact, rather than being displaced from our homes, we're actually more confined to our homes. But the coronavirus pandemic has certainly uprooted us from many of our rhythms and routines, and cut us off us from lots of our familiar spaces, including our church. So maybe being separated and scattered is a good opportunity for us to remember and reflect on the fact that the presence of Jesus is what makes the church the church. In a situation where we don't have our building, our bulletins, our pews, and our hymnals, we do have Jesus. And times like these remind us that ultimately, he's all we've got.

Father John McKenzie once noted:

If the church were to lose its hierarchy, its clergy, its vast collection of buildings, its stores of learning amassed over the centuries, even the text of its sacred books, and had to face the world with nothing but the living presence of the Risen Jesus and its mission to proclaim the Good News to all nations and people, it would be no less a church than the church of Peter and Paul was. Perhaps it might be more of a church than it is now.²

Though we might think that being separated from one another, especially on the Lord's Day, could weaken us as a church, God can actually work in these circumstances to make us a more Christ-centered and Christ-reliant congregation. After all, Christ is the one who came looking for us when we had gone astray. Christ is the one who has reconciled us to God and to one another. Christ is the one who brings us together and holds us together.

"Where two or three come together in my name, there am I with them." Jesus doesn't mean that he's just another church member, a numerical addition that we can report when we send our statistical summary to the denominational headquarters. No, Jesus is God's way of being in our midst, doing the things that God does. Jesus is among us, speaking. Jesus is among us, listening. Jesus is among us, watching. Jesus is among us, judging. Jesus is among us, saving. Jesus is among us, comforting. Jesus is among us, healing. Jesus is among us, guiding. Jesus is among us, giving. Jesus is among us, teaching. Jesus is among us, calling. Jesus is among us, forgiving. Jesus is among us, forming. Forming us not only as individuals but as a fellowship, a community of disciples who participate in his mission of gathering the scattered.

Christian community is never easy. And it doesn't get any easier when the coronavirus pandemic separates us from one another, physically and geographically. But Jesus' promise doesn't come with conditions. He doesn't say that if we're all together in the same building, then he'll be with us. He doesn't say that if we all interpret the Bible in exactly the same way, then he'll be with us. He doesn't say that if we all share the same political views, then he'll be with us. He doesn't say that if we all like the same style of worship, then he'll be with us. He doesn't say that if we never hurt one another or fail one another, then he'll be with us. No, he promises that as we come together *in his name*, that is, under his authority and seeking to be aligned with his will, he is with us.

In many ways, the coronavirus pandemic has isolated us from one another. But the good news is that social distancing isn't an issue for Jesus. No matter the circumstances, he draws near, comes close. Nothing keeps him from proximity to us. He enters this network of relationships called Grace Baptist Church, and occupies this communal space that we share with one another. Whether you and I are face to face or online, Jesus knows that we can't be the church without him. He has been, is now, and will be, with us. So be assured that whatever unfolds in the days ahead, he will hold our congregation together, strengthen us, and sustain us.

¹ Lolly Bowean, "Ministers Look to Rebuild Lost Flocks." *Chicago Tribune* (September 19, 2005).

² *Leadership*, Vol. 15, No. 2.